

Melton received a report from two black men who had been assaulted with a sword by the Rough Riders and Red Shirts. The men “showed marks of violence on their persons” from the attacks and were later confined at home and unable to swear out warrants against their attackers.<sup>43</sup>

Just as in the statewide campaign, Red Shirt participants were drawn from various levels of society. The makeup of the Red Shirt/Rough Rider brigades in Wilmington is somewhat difficult to ascertain. As evidenced by their leader Mike Dowling, some of the Red Shirts were Irish immigrants.<sup>44</sup> Historian Shelia Smith McKoy observed that for some of Wilmington’s Irish residents, “attaining whiteness—the process of replacing an ethnic identity for a racial identity—was integral to their participation in the white riot.” Further, she contended that “the Irish embraced white supremacy in order to make their whiteness visible” in a world where the economic and social plight of poor whites was often invisible to the greater Democratic Party machine.<sup>45</sup> Other rhetoric tied the Red Shirts to Scottish roots. During a speech given at a rally, William B. McKoy explained that the concept of the red shirt as a sign of battle originated in Scotland, where widowed Highlanders used their husbands’ bloody shirts as banners to demonstrate to the king their plight. Although a weak explanation for the use of the red shirt, in an area of strong Scots heritage, McKoy

nevertheless appealed to concepts of homeland, protection of women, and honor.<sup>46</sup>

Non-Democrats in Wilmington watched the activities of the Red Shirts with trepidation. W. J. Harris, a white “borned and bred Republican” appointed Inspector of Weights and Measures by the Fusionists, observed that “hatching of the Red Shirts” was effective since he “was right smartly intimidated” at election time. He explained that “Populists voted the white supremacy ticket through fear” even as he and others felt that the talk of guns and force by Democrats was a bluff. Harris considered

---

<sup>46</sup> Other speculative explanations for the origin of the Red Shirt are found scattered in the historical record. J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton noted that often the Ku Klux Klan outfits were all in red, indicating that perhaps the Red Shirt movement from South Carolina was an outgrowth of that organization. In *Born Fighting*, James Webb stated that the “warrior aristocracy” of the Scotch-Irish “was still in place in the South of the late 1800’s.” Webb explained that “a significant percentage” of whites in the South “were living in economic conditions no different than blacks” and that “the diminishment of blacks” was “a device for maintaining social and economic control ordered from above at the threat of losing one’s place—or job—in the white community.” Webb continued to explain the Scotch-Irish mentality when he stated that “violence in defense of one’s honor had always been the moniker of this culture” and that even though whites “believed emphatically in racial separation, the true battle lines . . . were not personal so much as they were political and economic.” Several references to men who were members of the Red Shirts are found scattered throughout the historical record. Theodore Swann was identified as a leader of the Rough Riders. Swann’s family had roots in Wilmington and he was most likely born in the city. The Swanns were carpenters and brick masons, perhaps leading to some competition and tension between the family and prominent African American carpenter families in the city. James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scotch-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 238-246; Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 461; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 4, 1898; 1870 and 1900 New Hanover County Census for Theodore Swann and his father B. F. Swann.

---

Historical Collection; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 5, 1898.

<sup>43</sup> *Contested Election Case*, 362.

<sup>44</sup> In an interview with Harry Hayden, Captain T. C. James of the Wilmington Light Infantry, referred to Dowling as a “hotheaded” Irishman. Hayden, *WLI*, 75.

<sup>45</sup> McKoy acknowledged Wilmington’s pre-Civil War population featured a large contingent of recent Irish immigrants and that by 1890, many of their descendants lived in sub-standard housing and were unemployed alongside more recent Irish immigrants. Shelia Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot*, 43.